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Contemporary Rural Social Work Journal

Volume 7 | Number 2

Article 11

9-1-2015

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Recommended Citation

Kindle, Peter A. Ph.D. (2015) "Teaching Students to Write Book Reviews," *Contemporary Rural Social Work Journal*: Vol. 7 : No. 2 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/crsw/vol7/iss2/11>

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Teaching Students to Write Book Reviews

Peter A. Kindle
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Abstract. This teaching note argues that one value associated with preparing book reviews for publication is the increased capacity to develop this skill in undergraduate and MSW-level social work students. A book review assignment is presented that has been effective in developing student authors. After graduation, student authors ($N = 21$) agreed that acceptance for publication improved their self-confidence, increased attention to their studies, and enhanced their practice.

Keywords: book reviews, teaching

The production of descriptive book reviews to summarize new scholarly work and scientific findings has been traced back to the 17th century Enlightenment. As the number of new titles increased, attempts to provide comprehensive catalogs of new books ceased in favor of selectivity and critical appraisal in the 19th century leading to the contemporary academic standard of objective evaluation by a qualified scholar (Ortega y Miranda, 1996). Appeals to consider the dissemination value of high quality reviews as an important academic contribution (Gibbs, 2013) have not prevailed in an academic marketplace that categorizes reviewing as service (Felber, 2002; Toor, 2012) or self-education (Lee, Green, Johnson, & Nyquist, 2010). Accordingly, only 16 of the 41 social work journals included in the *Journal Citation Reports Social Science Edition* published book reviews in 2011. Understandably, social work educators may avoid investing the time necessary to develop into competent reviewers. This Teaching Note argues that there are ample reasons for social work educators, especially those serving smaller rural programs, to reconsider their reluctance to develop reviewers.

Reasons to Write Book Reviews

The scholarly stature of academic books is established primarily by the quantity and quality of published book reviews (Worsham, 2012), which leads to substantial author and publisher support for reviewing. Gibbs (2013) argued that the book reviewer may contribute substantially to the dissemination of high quality work, and Lee et al. (2010) added that it is equally important to inform potential readers to avoid low quality work. *Print* (2011) reported that traditional publishing was up 47 percent and reprints/print-on-demand up 8400 percent from 2002 to 2010, highlighting the magnitude of the challenge associated with maintaining currency in research, theory, and practice trends.

Some might suggest that social work educators may maintain currency by simply reading new literature; but as Kahn and Holody (2009) argued, “the real work of writing [is] the organization, synthesis, and integration of ideas” (p. 88). The process of preparing a high quality book review is especially recommended for the developing writer (Lee et al., 2010; Worsham, 2012) as it helps the writer discover voice, frame arguments, analyze content reflectively and critically, and relate that content to self and social issues (Waller, 2000). A final reason for reviewing books is quite simple: One who does not develop this skill will be hindered in passing this skill along to students.

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Faculty serving smaller rural social work programs may find these suggestions particularly suitable for their teaching focus and limited research resources for the reasons noted above; however, it may be even more important for rural social workers to be heard. Smalley and Warren (2012) have argued convincingly that rurality is an unrecognized cultural diversity issue in its own right. To the extent that social work educators allow workload demands, time constraints, and resource scarcity to minimize their potential contributions to the professional literature, they may be in violation of their own professional values and ethics. Moreover, writing book reviews is a modest, but meaningful way to raise one's voice.

Using Book Reviews to Improve Student Writing

Amidst the larger literature concerned with improving student writing on all program levels, there is a small thread encouraging social work students to submit manuscripts for publication. Support for submission of MSW student work is scant, perhaps because as much as one-third of MSW students may not possess adequate writing skills to be successful in graduate school (Alter & Adkins, 2006). Kane (1978) described a team-based research project where MSW students produced a manuscript after graduation. And, some evidence suggests that improvement in the students' ability to master academic prose is linked to better writing in practice contexts (Rai & Lillis, 2013). Linsley (2002) wrote about encouraging her MSW-degreed peers to speak up, advocate, and establish expertise through writing. There is generally stronger support for doctoral student submissions as part of their academic preparation (Bender & Windsor, 2010). Page-Adams, Cheng, Gorgineni, and Shen (1995) even tested the productivity of a doctoral student writing group and found that in-group productivity exceeded out-group student productivity by more than three times.

Outside of social work, Prat-Sala and Redford (2010) found that deep and strategic undergraduate student learning was determined by self-efficacy beliefs in reading and writing. A follow-up study linked improvements in perceived self-efficacy to higher quality manuscripts in the second year of college (Prat-Sala & Redford, 2012). Writing for the American Association of Colleges and Universities, Kuh (2008) described writing intensive courses as one of the high impact educational practices that significantly influence student engagement, retention, and graduation.

Guidelines for Writing Book Reviews

As an instructor working with both graduate and undergraduate social work students, this author developed a book review assignment that has resulted in 24 book reviews accepted for publication in the last three years. Graduate students are provided detailed review notes on a first draft of the review and required to submit the review after revisions. Undergraduate students are provided more general feedback and awarded bonus credit if they choose to submit the review. In addition to general review notes on undergraduate first drafts, the second draft goes through a one-to-two hour final revision where the instructor and student work together. This assignment has been used in social policy classes on both program levels and in an undergraduate mental health elective.

Selecting a Book

The first step to getting a book review published is to select a good book. Academic journals are usually most interested in considering reviews on books published by a university press. Amazon's Advanced Search tool makes it easy to locate recently published books. It is very hard to get an editor to consider a book that is older than two years, so stay current. The selection should be nonfiction published in the last two years from a substantial press. Self-published and fiction books should not be selected.

Selecting a Publication Outlet

Finding a journal that will consider your review can take time. The first problem is that some journals do not publish book reviews. The second is that some journals that publish book reviews will not accept unsolicited submissions. If the journal's webpage is unclear about considering unsolicited reviews, contact the book review editor by email for permission to submit. If there is no book review editor listed on the editorial board roster, it is safe to assume that the journal does not publish book reviews.

Match the mission of the journal with the content of the book. Read one or two reviews in the journal to get an idea of the journal's expectations. University libraries tend to have electronic access to a list of journals that can be quite useful in locating prospective publication outlets.

Preparing the Review

Read the entire book. Make sure to take a few notes while reading. Know why the author(s) wrote the book and to whom it is addressed. Clearly identify and understand the central arguments and key ideas expressed in the book. Reviews that are mildly positive have a better chance of being published than reviews that are highly critical of the book. Focus the review on describing accurately and succinctly the book's content, not your opinions. Personal information or extraneous connections should be minimized.

However, it is essential that a book review be written in a manner that demonstrates that the reviewer has processed the content deeply and reflectively. Read the book from a critical perspective. Students tend to have too much respect for anything in print. An argument is not valid because of an author's credentials or the stature of the publisher. Even the best book can be improved, and even the most laudatory review should be able to suggest improvements. This outline may be useful in structuring a review:

- Opening paragraph – Describe the author(s), to whom the book is addressed, and its central argument(s). One thing that works very well here is to comment on the degree to which the author has accomplished his/her goal and what else the book really offers. The easiest way to get published is to have a *hook* here that grabs the reader.
- Middle paragraph(s) – These paragraphs can be the most difficult to craft appropriately because of the necessity to convey the content of the chapters in only a few words. Provide enough detail to enable the reader to understand the

author's perspective on the subject matter. Do not simply list the topics covered. "This chapter is about proposals to privatize Social Security" does not convey any information about what the proposals are. "The author proposes to privatize Social Security by diverting half of the current payroll tax into individual private retirement accounts" is better.

- Next to last paragraph – Provide a brief list of suggestions for improving the book or provide a mild criticism of something specific. This should not be comprehensive of every flaw, but clearly demonstrate the depth of understanding developed in the review process. Specific suggestions are customary, but be sure to consider the book's message in a broader social context such as a social issue or usefulness for practice.
- Last paragraph – Describe who will benefit most from reading this book and what they will gain. Speak specifically to the journal's audience.
- Reviewer identification – Somewhere, the journal will identify the author of the review. Provide this information in the format that previous reviewers have used.

Three double-spaced pages in APA format are approximately 800 words which will be acceptable to most journals. Do not exceed 1,200 words. Always spell- and grammar-check and eliminate all errors noted before submitting. Always check the instructions for authors on the journal website for rules to follow. If they exist, follow them exactly.

Submitting the Review for Publication

Submit the review strictly in accordance with the journal's instructions for authors. In some cases, this will be as a MS Word document attached to an email. In other cases, an electronic manuscript submission system will require registration.

Acknowledgement of receipt of submissions usually occurs within 30 days, perhaps a little more if it is over the holidays. Feel free to contact the book review editor by email if you do not receive an acknowledgement within 60 days.

In general, book reviews are not peer-reviewed, although this is beginning to change for some journals. Rejection is the most likely response, but a submission by a student will almost always receive some form of review comments if the review is accepted for publication. Respond to these quickly and thoroughly.

A well-written review of a book relevant to a journal's audience will often be accepted for publication in a matter of days, but publication can take many months. Some form of publication or copyright agreement is almost always required. Expect an email asking for a signed release when the review is being prepared for publication. Respond to this quickly as well. Failure to respond quickly to review notes and requests for signed publication agreements will delay or cancel the publication.

Benefits Associated with this Assignment

According to national polling data, the general reading habits of Americans have declined over the last three decades even when new electronic access to books is included. Almost one-fifth of Americans did not read a book in 2011, up from 8 percent in 1978; and heavy readers of more than 50 books a year declined from 13 percent to 5 percent (Rainie, Zickuhr, Percell, Madden, & Brenner, 2012). Requiring students to select, read, and review a high quality book is one possible approach to reversing this trend among social workers. From the perspective of a social work educator, this assignment may also help develop career-long learners; nurture student skills in discovering, appraising, and attending to social trends and social change; and improve the critical thinking skills of students, especially skills related to reviewing and synthesizing content (Council on Social Work Education, 2008).

In order to determine student perceptions of the benefits associated with this assignment, an IRB approved online survey was conducted ($N = 21$, response rate of 75%) with those students whose reviews had been accepted for publication. All had graduated by the time of this survey. Nineteen of the student authors provided open-ended responses to describe their feelings about the assignment before submitting. Most were excited, although five did comment that the assignment was intimidating. Likert responses to six questions indicated that acceptance of the student authored manuscripts *improved their self-confidence* (85.7%), made them *more serious about their studies* (71.4%), and *helped them in their practice* (57.1%). Less than half concluded that the acceptance *helped them accept other challenges in their life* (42.9%), and very few felt that the acceptance *changed their career aspirations* (19%).

Conclusion

Social work educators who have not published book reviews may wish to consult Hartley (2010) and Lee et al. (2010) for additional suggestions and guidance. Developing this skill and passing it along to students may effectively target specific practice behaviors as mentioned above, increase student self-confidence which may be a prelude to improved writing (Prat-Sala & Redford, 2012), and encourage students to be more serious about their studies.

Skeptics will note that students are unlikely to produce reviews that meet the general expectation of a qualified expert (Gibbs, 2013; Worsham, 2012). Hartley (2005) explored the usefulness of book reviews among educators and found that the highest ranked value associated with book reviews was “a straightforward overview of what the book was about” (p. 1200). These findings were confirmed with a larger group of academics in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences (Hartley, 2006). Apparently, a descriptive book review once again has value.

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